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(Article begins on next page)

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“A time bomb in the cupboard”: style and photographic objectivity in  
Penelope Lively’s *The Photograph*.

Abstract

Photographs in fiction can be exploited as samplings of past actions, past lives and historical events, and their symbolic and iconic role is used to catalyse and condense significant aspects of the plot. By positioning pictures in the narrative, writers fix moments in the fictional life of the characters to confront the external experiences of the readers. Time, memory, domesticity, trauma may all be described by exploiting the photographic medium within a story to stimulate response effectively.

In *The Photograph*, Penelope Lively uses photography to fragment perception. She explores singular points of view on visual, verbal and recollected narration. Traditional expectations for photography’s realism are presented as something that creates a constant sense of uncertainty. The photograph muddles everything the characters had previously thought real. Rather than stabilising identity, the photograph confounds perception and imagination; it assembles inexpressible truths, unfulfilled desires, and wishes. Visual and verbal representation strategies interweave to create a hybrid genre-bending mosaic, thus creating a postmodern text that questions photographic truth.

The article examines the notion of untruth in relation to photography and illustrates the function of the photograph as a stylistic and linguistic device that explains the idea of untruth within the narrative. The novel describes the negotiation between photography as a description of reality and photography as a re-invention of authenticity. It is Lively’s postmodern style that extends visual perception to unveil potential meanings. Its un-truth proves to be a powerful means of persuasion beyond any aesthetic function of narrative.

Keywords: Penelope Lively, postmodern narrative, stylistics, visual imaginary, photography.

I.

From the beginning, photography and narration inspired each other. The interplay resulting from the mixing of the two has been investigated in terms of their material connexion, and by examining the proximity of their historical and ideological matrixes (Bryant 12-24). Photographs have been considered as narrative devices, as documents, and metaphors. Alternatively, they have been described as a recurrent theme and placed into a framework of temporal and spatial montage on the page, within the structure of a book, and as part of an archive (Horstkotte and Pedri 8; Beaten and Bleyen 182).

In this perspective, criticism has focused on two poles, the Victorian as the source of the interplay, and the Modernist as a development of more complex aesthetic practices.

In Armstrong's analysis, for example, Victorian photography is understood as an analogue of literary realism as it addressed readers accustomed to the presence of visual representations in verbal narratives. Fiction had created visual expectations in its readership that could be met by photography (7-12). In turn, photography gained authority by its very use in fiction and testified for the truth of the narrative itself (42). On the other hand, as Green-Lewis explains, Victorian fiction was fascinated by "the interplay of images, worlds, and things". The "exploration of the complexities of truth-telling" was attractive because "despite being framed by the culture of realism, photography's appeal was due, in part, to its associations with the *unknown*, the *unreal*, the *unstable*" (94). In other words, photography stimulated the need to investigate the psyche, the invisible, and what was previously felt to be beyond human nature.

In turn, critics of the Modernist period have placed photography in the middle of a discursive struggle between individuals and institutions, showing how the interplay with literature contributed to the de-structuring of conventional models of identity. Michael North, for example, underlines that photography appealed to artistic and literary modernists "because it showed the rich possibilities left to art by the very imperfection of our sensory filters" (11). Karen Jacobs maintains that the tension between the documentary and the visionary perspective was a vital trait of the relationship and proved to be the most appealing aspect of photography (19-20). In the Modernist frame, the experience of both media, the

textual and the visual involved a sort of interior gaze that disclosed the intimate dimension of the self. For this reason, images, and especially photographs could be strategically placed within various forms of narration (21).

More generally, photography and literature seem to be fascinated by a third dimension, a different level of perception whose symbols are hidden in the texture of the world surrounding us. Both investigate the existence of a dense, evocative surplus dwelling in any event or phenomena that can be experienced by humans. Photography and literature encapsulate accidental details, glimpsed spaces, twilight zones, threshold places – and Benjamin’s “optical unconscious” – of course (Benjamin 7).

As Victor Burgin points out: “the image is not simply a material thing – a photographic print or the bright light on a screen – nor is it just an optical event” (Bishop and Cubitt 208). The image is a psychological process that is revealed in the space that separates words and images: a semiotic and affective area where to place meaning, and where to understand the truth or untruth of memory. In fact “our access to history has nothing to do with knowing the past as it was, but it is rather a matter of the activation of memory in moments of crisis”. Furthermore, “one way of understanding this moment of crisis is the experience of affect, or even the apparent lack of it, in our first encounter with a place” (208).

Burgin’s understanding of photography fits into the textual dynamics of Penelope Lively’s novel *The Photograph* (2003) where personal history and the force of memory in a moment of crisis are the focal moments of narration. Lively uses photography to explore the subjective and fractured nature of visual and verbal recollections, a third dimension where the understanding of reality as something objective and unquestionable collides with the meaning suggested by the photograph. Authenticity is thus deconstructed to expose the partiality and the incompleteness of memory. The photograph creates a semiotic space where layers of perception and experience pile up to show the existence of potential parallel stories dwelling in the minds of the characters.

To illustrate the point, I will examine excerpts of the text to highlight the role played by language and style in circumscribing a cognitive and narrative space. An aesthetic frame where feelings and memories are conceptualised by a visual and gestural prompt, the photograph, that creates “paths of open options” (Dancygier 35-40). Characters react to an unexpected situation activating a complex response to

the image which, for this reason, is the primary narrative anchor. As a narrative device, the image establishes different temporal sequences of events, reveals multiple identities, and suggests missing elements of the plot. As Dancygier points out,

[...] we do know what a photograph is, and we expect it to represent a recognisable reality. If that reality is not provided, it can still be constructed. We can thus say that narrative anchors are narratively salient expressions which rely metonymically on frames and exercise our representational abilities but create suspense by providing necessary information only bit by bit (51).

The characters in the novel discover bits of different realities according to the well known kaleidoscopic display of points of view that characterises Lively's technique, thus confirming the relevance of the photograph itself in narrative terms (Moran "The Novels" 101-120).

## 2.

The narrative function of the photograph in this novel has been discussed by Laurence Petit, to highlight Lively's "photographic *modus operandi*, whereby the novel becomes a metaphorical dark chamber staging an "inverted revelation". This process of disclosure leads to the source of the photographic matrix, which is a missing negative. "This missing negative, therefore, becomes the dominant metaphor for a story governed in its entirety by negativity and nothingness" (227). By postulating a photographic quality of the text as an interpretative metaphor, Petit provides a very convincing reading and offers insight into the text's dynamics. In particular, he underlines the relationship between the image, i.e. the condition of being, and its contrary, i.e. a permanent state of absence and missing that constitutes the dominant mood of the characters.

Janice Hart also discusses the structure of Lively's narrative by establishing parallels with other texts that exploit photography as a similar device. She sees the photograph "as a strategy to confound, as opposed to confirming, everything the characters had previously thought about themselves and each other" (114). Moreover, she points out how the author offers "the reader a sense of the present which is infected with the past, combined with a conception of the future which

appears essentially indeterminate.” (117). An essential dimension of this indeterminacy is that the future extends beyond the conclusion of the story.

The absence/ presence of the photograph that Petit identifies with a missing negative is here understood as the essence of the photograph itself, the extension of reality into a new potential one (Hart 124). There are indeed multiple forms of experience envisaged in the novel, none of which is beyond a realistic view of life. Not surprisingly, Lively downsizes narration to its essence by developing a basic plot. Focus is placed on a carousel of characters and their reaction to the discovery of the protagonist’s seemingly double life. It is people that matter above the events. Their memories are unsettled as the photograph frames inexpressible truths, unfulfilled desires, and untold wishes. The dialectics at work creates a contingent and incomplete picture of the world to be adjusted: a “vast disorder of objects” (Barthes “Camera Lucida” 6).

In other words, the photograph compels the characters to balance personal anxieties with the need of being accepted and belonging to an authentic, ordinary course of life. The impact with the image questions the authenticity of experience, which is also a focal element in of the novel that is typically postmodern also in stylistic terms. (Hutcheon 53-56; 57-60).

In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes discussed language, the system around which language is built, which is social, and style which is personal. In between language and style, there is writing which relates creativity and a social function which is its historical dimension (14). Barthes predicted a crisis of the significance, authority and social function of literature in its clash with a discursive context permeated by the visual. This clash led to the regression of writing to its “degree zero”, i.e. to a form liberated from the frame of history (16-18). In this perspective, postmodern writing is a form of spoken writing, where characters are worded in their plainness, where events happen – that is all. There is a fracture between reality and its representation, for contemporary literature is a *monstrous* duplication of reality rather than its counterpoint or correspondent. As Lyotard has noted, the loss of meaning in postmodernity consists in the fragmentation of what we describe as real into a permanent “language game”, where the language is forefronted in its heterogeneous combinations (Lyotard 26).

Not surprisingly, the rhythm of contemporary prose is that of parataxis, along with short paragraphs, descriptivism, plainness and the centrality of verbs in

creating cohesion. The result is a spoken writing style which encapsulates features of orality in the written text. This device creates a cline or a continuum between the two poles of speech and formal writing comprising the intersection of various possible forms of expression (Currie 42-54).

In part, Lively exploits these devices in the novel. In particular, she prefers simple clauses, alternates simple and complex sentences, dropping in information which ultimately has a crucial significance in the plot, but which might not appear relevant at the point of reading. In the same way, she uses metanarrative to hint at the possible interpretation of the story, as can be observed in the excerpt below, for example, where Glyn, the co-protagonist, is not able to grasp the evidence brought up by a parallel narrative space. In other words, he cannot see the existence of a side narrative that has developed along with his story and his point of view:

[...] He is at the scene of the photograph. He does not need the thing itself, he knows what he saw, just as the words of the accompanying note are printed in his mind. Right, let's be objective about this. [...] Evidence, he thinks, I need evidence. Well, I can look for evidence. But first things first. What do I know that is certain? He scrutinizes his marriage. He considers the bald narrative, [...] The facts. And Glyn is of course a man of facts, par excellence. But he looks at these facts with fair contempt. They tell him little. They tell him only what he knows, and it is what he does not know that matters now. It is this sub-texts that signify, the alternative stories that lurk beyond the narrative. The fragmented versions of those years; his and hers. His own version has different facets.[...] And what about Kath's sub-text? For of course she too led this dual existence [...] And he knows nothing now of either it seems. And her evidence is irretrievable, wiped, lost. While his own is fatally distorted. [...] there is a lethal spin imposed by the photograph and that scribbled note. (Lively 23)

By looking at oneself through Kath, Glyn struggles to understand the missing opportunities of his own life. The photograph depicts what could be an ordinary and almost negligible moment in life. Yet, the character is dragged into a world of ephemeral apparitions from which to infer or his choices, the changes that have been or could have been with equal force and reality. In the passage above, a

fragmented style reinforces the point by the coexistence of different verb tenses and verb aspects that define the acts of perceiving, feeling and understanding.

In particular, rhythm is built on the paradox of using the present tense to construe the past. On the one hand, the past penetrates the life of the characters as a compelling narrative device, as the past is a cognitive dimension that leaves a deep mark in their psyche. As a counterpoint, the present tense is used here and throughout the text to intensify what links experiences, recollections, innuendoes and psychological fallacies. The present tense and, at times, even the present continuous, place any action beyond a specific point in time, they support the reality of acting, and thinking while acting.

More generally, verbs lexicalise happenings and encode representations of such happenings that may comprise past or present experiences at the same time (Manouilidou and De Almeida 8-11). The lack of knowledge, or the untruth of a situation, derives from these partial representations. Lively's style points at plainness, accuracy and economy in syntax to create a prose pattern that is clear to the point of resisting criticism – which is also typical of Lively's writing (Moran "Penelope Lively" 111-125).

Another critical aspect that can be addressed in linguistic terms is the role of memory, notoriously a central theme in Lively's writing (Kucała 160-162; Oró-Piqueras 2015; 2016). Memory is linked to History, to the stories of her characters, and it is a narrative device that she uses to engage with postmodern culture (Moran "Penelope Lively" 109-111). Postmodernism views the past as a montage of texts, media, genres, and ideas (Hutcheon 90; 158-160). Each fragment represents a single point of access to a broad understanding of socio-political forces. In this frame, memory is exposed in its fragility, and subject to the distortions of the mind, unable to provide a coherent interpretation of the past. Lively adheres to this view of the past: her narrative melts facts and fiction, creating a personal understanding of reality. As Purdy points out, Lively

[...] routinely harnesses two strong tendencies that are rarely seen in tandem: on the one hand the refusal to forget, to divorce the present from the past [...] on the other, a willingness to see the future as ontologically undetermined, as an existential project in which the past and the present will be preserved and transformed in the process of sublation (36-37).



As mentioned above, the past merges into the future, and the future re-enacts the past. In this perspective, the fact that something existed is not sufficient to support remembrance. When memory fails to construct a past event, the photograph replaces it and invalidates any form of retrieval. Photography is thus a surrogate of memory: the supposed authenticity of photography produces a stiffening of memory, impairing its ability to connect images coherently; hence, it becomes alarming and generates anxiety.

Lively investigates the sense of guilt of Glyn and Elaine and interrogates the authenticity of their lives by exploring their relationship with Kath, their wife and sister, respectively. Focused on their careers as a landscape historian and garden planner, they are two faces of the same being. Both manipulate the natural environment as they discipline their nature, but they are married to the opposite in character and disposition, Nick and Kath. The four characters represent a sentimental quartet, i.e. four poles seeking for a desperate balance in their own lives — couples of solitary individuals unable to see each other but on a surface level. Their approach to life is fuelled by the anguish generated by the inability to satisfy their temper. In this way, the function of the photograph is to reveal *their* truth, their failures and impairment, a parallel dimension of their being.

Kath committed suicide years before the narrative time. She is simultaneously the protagonist and the frame of the narrative, providing the context and the central theme without ever being physically present. However, the photograph brings her back as a ghost in the internal monologues that explicate the characters' experiences and create the plot. Memory also serves as the primary vehicle for multifarious narratives that focus on the trauma caused by Kath's suicide and affair. The reader is brought into the story as a kind of voyeur to each character's most private thoughts and anxieties. The reader is thus taken into the semiotic space of the photograph to observe the potentials of the character's lives, and to construe the bits of reality, the fragments of truth thus exposed in the story.

In substance, the novel is a choral biography: individual events are nothing more than relapses of happenings that take place above the will of the characters, and beyond their ability to understand it. They hold but a portion of the story. The photograph destabilises fixed opinions and prompts a reassessment of what was known about Kath, each character's relationship with her, and therefore their self-

knowledge. In this perspective, networking pain is mandatory to Glyn: his compelling impulse is supported by verbs that compress time into a constant state of anguish.

In the example below, feeling and perception climax into a state of distress signalled by verbs. The alternation of tense/aspect foregrounds knowledge as a central theme of the novel as well.

[...] He *has reviewed* the years with Kath, and *has found* small comfort. Now, he *turns* to Elaine. He *is going* to show the photograph to Elaine. Moreover, the note. She *does not have to know*. She *is better off not knowing*. However, *I know*, and *I cannot bear to know* alone. *I need* some community of outrage, or grief, or retrospective jealousy, or whatever it is that *I'm feeling*. So *I'm going to show* her. Most of all, *I need to know if she knew*. Back then. If *she has known* since. (Lively 27).

The personal investigation of the protagonist heads in the footsteps of Kath. She appears as an indecipherable child and then a flashy girl, and finally as a wife with the gift of sensuality and vitality. She fascinates anyone but hides bitterness and a constant sense of missing. The ghosts of Kath erase the boundaries of death; the several Kathes come to life again in the mind of others (Lively 62). Kath's multifaceted identity is composed and recomposed thanks to the fragments that friends and family add to her character and is fixed anew by the photograph. As in *Moon Tiger*, the principal character in the story shows a myriad of personalities: not surprisingly memories are enucleated through a heterodiegetic narrative.

The anamnestic process of characters like Glyn is then galvanised by a network of associations that further elaborate a series of connections that modify the context of any event. These connections change through personal experience, emotional states, and circumstances. Misunderstandings, remorse, repentance, anger, happy and sad memories re-emerge in the present. This will constitute a rich textual imaginary in which the new Kath, the one appeared with the discovery of the photograph, acts as a junction of contrasts and confluences. Glyn delves into his memories and refers to several types of memory, especially to the linguistic and perceptive dimension of memory: "Interesting. The operation of memory would seem to be largely receptive: what is seen, what is heard." (Lively 20). In an attempt

to dissolve all his doubts, he grasps nothing but fragments of events, that turns out to be empty.

In the example below, there is a rapid movement from the outside to the inside of the character. The alternation of verb forms and a quick variation of deixis (double marked) objectify experience and create the truth in the mind of Glyn:

[...] *He is* at the scene of the photograph. *He does not need* the thing itself, *he knows* what he saw, just as the words of the accompanying note are printed in his mind. Right, let's be objective about this. Evidence, *he thinks*, || *I need* evidence. Well, *I can* look for evidence. But first things first. What *do I* know that is certain? || *He scrutinizes* his marriage. *He considers* the bald narrative, which would run something like this. || On Saturday, 25 August 1984 Katharine Targett and Glyn Peters were married at Welborne Register Office. *They took up* residence at 14 Marlesdon Way, Ealing. In 1986 *they moved* to 29 St Mary's Road, Melchester by reason of Glyn Peters appointment to a professorial post at the University of Melchester. *They continued to live* at this address for the duration of their married life. || The move to Melchester, to this house. To a life of intensified activity, for him. || And now *Kath is more elusive* yet. That brief *time is now compacted* into an impressionistic blur of things said, things done. *He has reviewed* the years with Kath, and *has found* small comfort [...] (Lively 22-27).

From this moment on, the narrative rhythm changes to an even faster and more polyphonic pace in which the alternation of the characters' points of view accelerates the plot. Elaine also starts her circuit of memories, and she tries to focus on the day when the photo was taken, always in the context of an episodic long-term (declarative) memory:

[...] Elaine summons up that day, the day of this photograph. In a snatch of time - as she stirs her coffee, sets down the spoon, lifts the cup to her lips, drinks, returns it to the saucer - she recovers those hours [...] (62-63).

The re-enactment of Elaine's memory, however, presents unbridgeable flaws, as the woman cannot clearly remember what happened on the day when the photograph was shot. She experiences a kind of retroactive interference in which old

memories are superimposed on the filter of new information. In another point of the novel, though, the quest is developed with the appearance of multiple cognitive representations of Kath, something that haunts all the characters and defines their relationship with her. Elaine, in particular, exposes her *malaise*, the uneasiness of knowing that Kath has everything that she misses in psychological terms, especially empathy, and sensitivity:

[...] Elaine finds another Kath crowding in. These Kaths are not clear and precise, they do not say anything that she can hear, they are not doing anything in particular; they are somewhere very deep and far, they swarm like souls in purgatory, disturbing their silent reproach. Child-Kaths are mixes with grown-Kaths, so that the effect is of some composite being who is everything at once, no longer artificially confined to a specific moment in time- no longer ten years old, or twenty, or thirty, but all of those [...]. (153)

The photographic image cannot be dismissed; the character cannot deny or ignore its disruptive and violent force. As a result, they feel stuck in the space between the before/after, a moment of the discovery of the picture, a moment of breaking. Glyn and Elaine are “untethered from the moorings of space and time” (Lively 79) having to accept life as a montage that is not based on linear chronology, but on coincidence and recurrence if not by chance.

The investigations come to an end as Glyn turns to Mary Packard, the only person who can shed light on aspects of his wife’s life. The woman is the only one who keeps the secret of Kath’s pain: her unfulfilled desire to have a baby and her second miscarriage, her feeling alone. What leads Kath to suicide is her deep depression and unprecedented loneliness.

Finally, Glyn meets a woman he had never met, depressed and melancholic. The time shifting as expressed by verbs is used to reinforce the past/ present dichotomy and substantiate the guilt and meanness of the man:

[...] *Mary talks* about a Kath whom Glyn seems not to have known. This is when *she talks* about the miscarriage. *You never knew* about that, *did you?* *She says*. Kath *told* me *you didn’t*. She *wouldn’t have you know*. **You were away somewhere when it happened** - in the States, *I think she said*. *She was going to tell* you about

the pregnancy when *you got back*. It was *a while ago* - two or three years after you were married. You *hadn't realized* she wanted a child. It was the second, the second miscarriage. The second non-baby. The first one wasn't yours. *Way back, that was*. When she was *in her twenties*. She *told me* about it *once* in an offhand way - *that way* that *always* set alarms bells ringing. (Lively 223-224).

The lack of attention from her husband, the deep pain caused by the emotional crisis and loneliness pushed Kath into Nick's arms. The woman constant need for affection found a receptive response in her secret relationship with her brother-in-law, who gave her the reassurance that should have come from Glyn. Photography captures the gestures of the lovers. It is a clue to the betrayal, but it cannot shed light on the true nature of Kath, limiting itself to portray her as carefree, hand in hand with Nick— it is untrue.

Suffering was fed and will continue to be fed by the visual documents (the photograph, the portrait). For this reason, rather than being an objective testimony to authentic events, the photograph *tells* what is *not* in life but may have been. The prosthetic eye of the camera allows seeing beyond memory and experience, materialising the ambiguities and innuendos of life. As Berger points out

A photograph is effective when the chosen moment which it records contains a quantum of truth which is generally applicable, which is as revealing about what is absent from the photograph as about what is present in it. The nature of this quantum of truth, and the ways in which it can be discerned, vary greatly. It may be found in an expression, an action, a juxtaposition, a visual ambiguity, a configuration. Nor can this truth ever be independent of the spectator (180).

The novel ends with the archival of the photograph and a new function of visual understanding. A new form of cognition that fails to bring Glyn beyond his self-centred view of life, beyond his selfishness. It is no coincidence that Glyn decides to store the photo inside the cupboard, cultivating his anguish, more than a multifaceted memory of his wife. The photograph will continue to be there as a *memento mori*.

[...] That photograph is back in the landing cupboard. Glyn does not wish or intend *to look* at it again. He might as well destroy it, but the destruction of archival material offends his deepest instinct. Let it lie there. [...] But every now and then this detachment fails him. He is flung inexorably into *contemplation* of the other things. That day, above all. The day he returned in the evening to this empty house. He *moves through* the day again and again, and at the end *he sees* what *he saw* then. *The sight is the same as never was*, except that it is informed by new wisdoms, and *he looks differently*. Glyn knows now that he has to find a new way of living with a new Kath. And of living without her, in a fresh sharp deprivation. (Lively 235-236)

As we have seen, *The Photograph* questions the authenticity of the visual and destabilises the idea of time bringing the past into the present by a constant shift in the use of verbs. This stylistic strategy highlights that cognition converts an unordered set of memories, real or imagined into language, confirming a stylistic feature of Lively's writing that can be framed into a postmodern attitude towards narration. In the process, this strategy creates a meaningful construct: the semiotic space where characters display their subjectivity. Yet, the photograph exposes the falsification that the subject works on memories and his/ her persona, as memories are never true. A photograph is thus an unexpected modifier that creates a gap opened on parallel, unknown worlds, which are the *un-truths* of the novel.

### 3.

The prefix *un-* negates the meaning of truth. Truth and untruth are complementary antonyms that are mutually exclusive and cannot be graded. As a prefix, *un-* derives meaning by subtracting the idea of 'positiveness' from the base form to indicate *want of* veracity and hence divergence from the truth (Plag, 2003: 30-32).

There exist synonyms and words conceptually related to 'untruth', such as falsehood, deception, fallacy, error, fabrication and fiction, but instead of substituting the concept with a different word, derivation retains the core of the word and indicates a different pattern of signification relating to the original. The

use of the *un-* prefix generates an alternative meaning *from* and *next to* the positive one rather than flipping it (Bauer 1983; Bauer 2001; Bauer, Rochelle, Plag, 2013).

The OED<sup>1</sup> indicates that historically untruth expressed the idea of being *un-faith-ful*, *faith-less*; *dis-honest*; *un-fair*, *un-just* and wrong, but it also expressed the idea of being divergent from a standard. More generally, we can understand untruth as indicating a different state of reality, not necessarily a lie or something hidden and manipulated, but the lack of veracity, true semblance and plausibility (Horn 2005).

From a philosophical perspective, truth can be categorised both at the metaphysical and linguistic level (Kirkham, 1992). If we assert that something is true, we do so by describing a phenomenon: truth refers to something that appears to be real and can be perceived as such. Therefore by labelling something as true, we put language in relation to existence (being) and not just with the object or the phenomenon (Marian, 2016).

In other words, when we discuss the truth or untruth of an event, we are establishing a *linguistic* correspondence between facts, their state and meaning. Thus, if we assert that photography can be either true or untrue, we create a semantic relation between facts and meaning. The *un-* prefix allows considering a different semantic cluster that *derives* possible meanings developed from the scene or subject of the photograph, without negating its primary observable significance.

The acceptability of a specific *proposition* about a phenomenon depends on how well it fits, or how consistent it is, with our beliefs: such an idea of truth reflects well how we absorb new information and are sceptical and unresponsive to novelty. Therefore accepting or not the truth of photography or considering the potentials of its untruth depends on personal attitudes such as the above mentioned postmodern scepticism (Young, 2018; Bewes, 1997).

As indicated above, postmodern culture has cultivated disbelief and questioned the very definition of coherence in any field of culture (Ward, 1997)<sup>2</sup>. The postmodern topos of the inauthentic as best representing the state of humans is the result of a post-photographic way of imagining one's relation to the real. In this

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oed.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Coherence is an aspect of discourse that relates meaning as expressed at textual level to its realisation in a cultural context and semiotic space. The postmodern taste for fragmentation is crucial feature of its aesthetics which question the linear development of textual and visual narrative (Revelli, Van Leeuwen, 2018).

perspective, technology relocates identity on multiple levels of meaning. Art, instead, reveals what existed before the dominion of the visual and at the same time embraces all its potential. While art photography moves beyond the factual, photographic realism misrepresents a 'natural' or spontaneous understanding of reality by adding a whole new level of cognition which can be both rejected or exploited in aesthetic terms (Wilson, 2002). This dichotomy between realism and aesthetics best represents the coexistence of truth and untruth in postmodern discourse as it contradicts the idea that photography objectifies single moments in life. Rather than being an objective testimony to the truth, a photograph *tells* what is *not* in the picture but may have been in the space between us and a phenomenon where meaning is created. The prosthetic eye of the camera allows seeing beyond memory and experience, materialising the ambiguities and innuendos of life (Berger, 2013).

Photography started as an actual testimony to science, as a passive optics of vision embodying the need for an unmediated record of reality, and a way to manipulate light using technology. Realism in novel writing, photography and Positivism all sprang from the same passion and anxiety for the material aspects of life (Kember, 1996; Armstrong, 1999).

The new idea of time, as conceived in industrial societies also appreciated its ability to objectify memory: a single point, a moment in time to be located, recognised, and archived. In this way, photography expressed the need to overcome the anguish postulated by Heidegger as the inevitable fate of humans by the paradox of treasuring reality rather than negating it (Wells 2015; Lury 2013)<sup>3</sup>.

Photography as *techné* was seen as true to humans. This belief often reemerges in the way contemporary culture reacts to photographic truth, with no 'suspension of disbelief'. In fact, photographs are printed from negatives<sup>4</sup>, so the authentic photograph is the negative that can be subsequently reproduced. As for digital cameras, the output is a set of data that can be turned visible only by decoding softwares. Printing is an optional choice. Therefore the 'negative' has a

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger discussed the etymology of truth to work out the relation between the metaphysical and the linguistic representation of the concept. The Greek word is *a-letheia*. The hyphen indicates the alpha privative, which, similarly to the *un*-prefix in English, leads to the understanding of the term as 'that which is not hidden', or rather, 'that which is not veiled'. Truth is the unveiling of existence, while the un-truth of a phenomenon leads to unveiled possibilities. The idea of being always engaged in understanding the world and in networking perception with what surrounds us is a source of anguish (Wrathall, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Art photography represents an exception as it often revives 19th century techniques and goes into experimental procedures.



different format, but still, a photograph is something that must be translated and adjusted to be seen: for this reason, the idea of manipulated vs authentic photographs is meaningless in technical terms (Batchen, 1999).

We live in an age which daily addresses issues regarding the ethics of images: image theft on Instagram, photo plagiarism and manipulated images in photojournalism, fashion photography controlling female bodies, along with drone photography violating privacy. Unless the act of manipulation or the aesthetic intent is disclosed, these examples clash against the Romantic idea of authenticity. Digital photography can be manipulated to such a degree of precision that reality is the result of intentional practice. Reality is thus prefabricated (Fontcuberta, 2014).

The hyperrealism of photography, in particular, makes truer what is just banally true by blurring the boundary between 'augmented' reality and imagination. Digital photography creates real *trompe-l'œil* worlds in which, however, it is no longer a question of deceiving the eye, but of multiplying the meaning, to the paradox of having scientific data proved by hyper-realistic fake pictures (Kulka, 2002: 94-98; Mößner, 2018).

Nevertheless, photography – like writing – is productive, not merely reflective, it is a performative act. The truth/ untruth dialectics is in the mind of the viewer, in the effects it bears on the present not just in the scene as it is portrayed. Rather than being a faithful recording of the moment represented, photography is a replacement of memory itself. The fact that something existed is not sufficient to support remembrance. When memory fails to construct a past event, the photograph replaces it and invalidates any form of retrieval. Photography is thus a surrogate of memory. The supposed authenticity of photography produces a stiffening of memory, impairing its ability to connect images, which is a powerful form of narration (Batchen 1999: 100-120; Bate, 2010).

Individual memory refers to a personal interpretation of the past that determines the way we understand reality (Conway, Pleydell-Pearce, 2000: 261). Narrating the self involves diverse brain functions of which visual imagery represents a critical component. Research has defined two ways to encode and process visual information. On the one hand, we process the visual appearance of objects and scenes in terms of their shape, colour information and texture, on the other, there exists a spatial-imagery system processing information on object location, spatial relations and movement (Rubin, Schrauf, Greenberg, 2003; Siegel, 2015).

When we perceive the form and the function of a photograph, we realise the nature of the scene, but its meaning is produced by the pre-existing pictures that form the visual imagery of the individual. The photograph activates and re-activates personal memory. As can be seen in Lively's novel, if we perceive something alien in the scene, the photograph may become alarming generating excitement or anxiety (Adams, 2000).

In sum, we can understand photographic 'untruth' as the unveiling of possibilities, as revealing what is not in a picture but in the mind of the viewer. For this reason, photography is proactive and productive as it builds many possible interpretations of a phenomenon, their truth or untruth alike. Moreover, a photograph fills the space between humans and their environment by validating identity. As humans, we need to share the emotive reaction generated by visual experience: the activation of images and memories in other people's mind by sharing narratives is what can be observed in *The Photograph* as a stylistic device (Benwell, Stokoe, 2006)

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